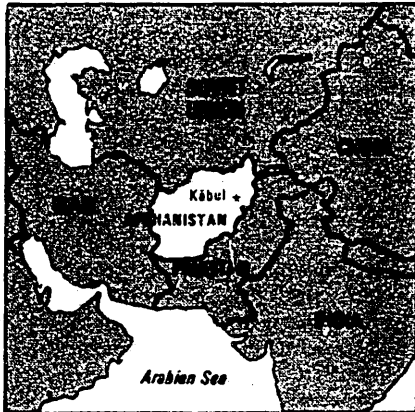


Afghanistan: 18 Months of Occupation

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Following is a paper written by Eliza Van Hollen of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in August 1981. It is a sequel to Special Report No. 79, "Afghanistan: A Year of Occupation," released in February 1981.

After 1½ years of Soviet occupation, the Soviets and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) have not been able to make headway in establishing the authority of the Babrak regime. Indeed, they appear to be losing ground to the guerrilla freedom fighters (*mujahidin*), who are maintaining impressive momentum.

On the other hand, the Soviets show no signs of abandoning their long-term objective of legitimizing a pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan and suppressing the resistance. They acknowledge that it will take longer than originally anticipated but seem to believe time is on their side.

Political Developments

Events of recent months underline Soviet and DRA awareness of the overriding importance of the political aspects of the struggle. The decision to broaden the leadership by divesting Babrak Karmal of the prime minister's job, the effort devoted to convening a National Fatherland Front assembly, and the special attention being paid to nationality and tribal sensitivities all reflect major political objectives of the regime and its Soviet sponsors. Nevertheless, these actions even taken together do not have the potential to turn the tide against the *mujahidin*.

Reorganization of the Government.

The initial purpose behind relieving Babrak of the prime ministership (while he remains President of the Revolutionary Council and Secretary General of the party) seems to have been to broaden the Parcham-dominated leadership by naming a Khalq prime minister and so to reconcile the increasingly alienated Khalq faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Soviets have long tried to heal this factional split. They have reason to be concerned about losing Khalq support because of the Khalq strength in Afghanistan's Armed Forces.

But the bitter political struggle over the prime minister's job and other attendant changes in government and party bodies has exacerbated the longstanding feud. This friction forced the authorities to postpone the sixth plenum of the party from May 13 to June 11. In the end, the crisis apparently was resolved only by widely reported secret visits to Moscow by Babrak and other leaders.

The outcome—naming another Parchami, Sultan Ali Keshntmand, as prime minister—indicated that the Khalq-Parcham feud continues and that the Soviets were not prepared to shift their support from Babrak and his faction to the Khalqis. The Parchamis picked up more strength in other areas of the reorganization as they increased their representation in important party and government bodies. Key Khalqis, however, also improved their political standing, and it is clear that the Soviets are still blocking a wholesale purge of the Khalq leadership by the Parchamis. The naming of Keshntmand as prime

minister may portend further splintering of the political leadership because Keshtmand could pose a serious political threat to Babrak. The two are said to be rivals within the Parcham wing and not friendly.

Other factors presage further weakening of the political fabric. Resistance successes against Afghan and Soviet military units and the *mujahidin's* enhanced capability to endanger regime sympathizers in towns and cities, most notably in Kabul, will cool the enthusiasm of opportunists and probably even of ideological loyalists. Many former party members have already been driven into the opposition; their nationalist sensitivities, offended by Soviet domination of Afghanistan's civil and military administrations, proved stronger than Marxist doctrine. This has been particularly true of Khalq military personnel, but Parchamis have also been affected. In mid-July, for example, a considerable number of Parcham families lost their sons when military school cadets were sent into a major battle against the *mujahidin*. This could seriously damage Parcham loyalty, particularly as many in Kabul believe that Soviet soldiers killed many of the Afghan cadets to keep them from retreating or defecting.

National Fatherland Front. As party loyalists lose heart, the failure of plans to demonstrate popular support for the Babrak regime by forming the National Fatherland Front (NFF) is not surprising. The NFF's constituent assembly—originally scheduled for March 21, the Afghan new year's day—was envisioned by DRA officials as a conclave of representatives of all elements of the Afghan population with emphasis on the tribes. It was to be in the tradition of Afghanistan's *Loya Jirgas* (assemblies of tribal chiefs) which have been convened at historic turning points in Afghanistan's political development. The purpose of the envisioned NFF *Jirga* was to endorse, and thus legitimize, the Babrak regime.

The NFF organizing committee, however, was stymied from the first. Despite its efforts in the provinces and tribal areas to persuade or coerce prominent figures to cooperate, lack of enough nonparty participants to make a credible showing prevented the committee from scheduling a meeting in March. The assembly was postponed until April, then May, and once again put off until June.

When the NFF assembly convened on June 15, with much official fanfare, it lasted only 1 day instead of the original-

ly scheduled 4-day propaganda spectacular. Many of the participants who were described as tribal representatives were actually party and government functionaries. Those prominent nonparty persons who collaborated with the NFF now regret it; they have become prime targets for assassination by the resistance. The assassinations of a religious leader from Ghazni and a prominent retired general have received much publicity, and resistance spokesmen have announced a target list of 30 NFF participants. These assassinations starkly underline the dangers of associating with the regime.

Nationality and Tribal Policy. The reorganization of the former Ministry of Tribes and Border Affairs into the new Ministry of Tribes and Nationalities highlights a key element of Babrak's policy under Moscow's guidance. The objective is to discourage a unified nationalist opposition to Kabul by emphasizing the separate cultural and political aspirations of ethnic minorities and tribal groups.

Setting the tribes against one another has been a traditional means of maintaining the government's control, but in the current crisis this tactic has had little success. Instances of tribal collaboration with the Babrak regime appear to have been of limited duration; weapons and bribe money have been accepted from the government but then used to bolster the resistance. Indeed, the presence of a common foreign enemy has led tribes to bury their traditional rivalries and to join in a united effort as they did in the 19th century.

The Soviets, consistent with their nationalities policy in Soviet Central Asia, probably believe that Kabul's tribal and ethnic strategy will eventually prevail. In view of the resistance movement's successes, however, the many tribes and ethnic groups engaged in trying to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan are unlikely to abandon their effort in the foreseeable future.

Military Situation

A combination of political restraints and operational realities is the principal obstacle to the success of Moscow's military policy in Afghanistan. The fact that the Soviets have not increased their troop strength beyond 85,000, in spite of the continuing military standoff, may reflect concern about the political cost both in the international arena and in

the effort to enhance Babrak's image with the Afghan populace. A massive military effort would doom the political strategy and undercut the Soviets' primary military goal of maintaining adequate stability while building up the Afghan forces to fight the *mujahidin*.

This policy has failed badly. The situation has become progressively more unstable, and the Afghan forces are increasingly unreliable. Aggressive resistance tactics have forced the Soviets to involve themselves in military operations throughout the country on a daily basis. Suffering from excessive concern with bureaucratic procedures and from a lack of zeal, Soviet forces have not been able to deal decisively with guerrilla ambush operations along all major roads and with expanded guerrilla operations against military and government targets.

Soviet offensives to take important resistance strongholds and to penetrate into territory held by the resistance have failed repeatedly. The most striking recent example is the mid-July effort to drive resistance guerrillas out of the Paghman mountains, only 12 miles northwest of Kabul. Heavy casualties were sustained by both sides, including hundreds of villagers in the area, but the combined Soviet-Afghan force was forced to retreat. It was impossible for the authorities to cover up this defeat so close to Kabul, particularly as the dead included at least 70 military school cadets.

Other instances of the failure of Soviet offensives include repeated attempts to penetrate the Panjshir Valley, an important resistance stronghold that gives access to the main north-south road in the strategic Salang Pass area, and an unsuccessful attempt in June to take a key guerrilla redoubt in the western province of Nangarhar. Furthermore, most of the central uplands of Afghanistan, the area known as the Hazarajat, remain inaccessible to Soviet troops.

Even though Soviet forces have not been very effective against the insurgents, Soviet casualties probably are not heavy enough by themselves to induce the Soviets to seek a negotiated withdrawal of their forces. Soviet casualty figures are not known, but it is evident that they have lost a considerable number of men and many tanks and helicopters.

That the Soviets are aware of the need to improve their performance is reflected in the measures they have taken to reorganize and tailor their

forces to guerrilla warfare. It is unlikely, however, that they will be able to deal satisfactorily with sagging morale. The Soviet soldier whose father fought heroically at Stalingrad does not have a cause in Afghanistan, but his opponent is fighting a holy war.

Efforts to build up the Afghan forces have had even less success. Defections continue, and the morale of those who remain is extremely low. The government's refusal to release soldiers who have completed their extended tours of duty is causing particular unhappiness. The seriousness of the military manpower shortage has been made abundantly clear in many ways; party members have been ordered to the "hot" fronts, forced conscription continues throughout the country, and militia and regular units are suffering unnecessarily heavy casualties because of inadequate training.

Resistance

The *mujahidin* forces are active everywhere in Afghanistan. Drawn from all tribes and ethnic groups, most of them follow local leaders and fight in their own areas. Others, however, are affiliated with the political groups in Peshawar. Rivalries between organizations have led to some major clashes in recent months between *mujahidin* bands

over territorial rights, but there have also been many instances of joint operations and sharing of equipment and resources. When word spreads that a *mujahidin* unit is threatened, many others will converge on the area to render assistance.

The resistance fighters recently have been particularly active in the areas north of Kabul and even in the Kabul suburbs. The most dramatic operation occurred in early June when large quantities of ammunition and petroleum stores were blown up at Bagram airbase near Kabul. There have been many other instances of *mujahidin* aggressiveness in recent months along major supply and convoy routes and against government-held provincial and district centers. During the spring and early summer, the government has been forced to abandon additional districts to resistance control. Although the *mujahidin* still cannot take and hold a major city or provincial capital, they have made life increasingly dangerous for government sympathizers in all urban centers.

Mujahidin mobility generally serves to protect them from heavy casualties, although occasionally they are trapped and must stand and fight. There continue to be reports that the Soviets are using potent chemical agents to flush out guerrillas and make them targets for helicopter gunships. More often it is the

noncombatant villager sympathizers who bear the full brunt of Soviet retaliation. The continuing heavy flow of refugees to Pakistan, totaling over 2.2 million as of late June 1981, is a constant reminder of the daily destruction, suffering, and upheaval produced by Soviet military operations.

Efforts continue to unite exile resistance groups. Representatives of the six major groups signed an agreement in Peshawar in late June to set up a coordinating council. There are already signs, however, that the council is destined to be short lived.

The guerrilla fighters inside Afghanistan, however, seem to flourish despite the competition among exile groups. Babrak and his Soviet sponsors may be counting on traditional tribal and ethnic rivalries to undermine the *mujahidin*. But nationalist reaction to foreign occupation and the religious fervor of a holy war have proved to be powerful forces in motivating the resistance movement. ■

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